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RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 4469
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA 4802
RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 6174
RUEHQD/AMEMBASSY QUITO 7084
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 1852
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0238
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 000374

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/10/2029

TAGS: ASEC PGOV PREL PTER PINR BL

SUBJECT: MAS MOB TAKE HOUSE, BEAT FAMILY OF FORMER VP

REF: LA PAZ 211

Classified By: A/EcoPol Chief Brian Quigley for reasons 1.4 (b)(d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Apparently induced by agitators, protesters from one Lake Titicaca region ransacked the house and attacked the family of former Vice-President and current presidential candidate Victor Hugo Cardenas on March 7. Although the government has launched an investigation, officials including Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera discounted the incident, blamed Cardenas for discordant political views with his region, and suggested the seizure of his property could be supported by the new constitution. Cardenas, meanwhile, blamed the Morales Administration for the attack and claimed it was targeted at silencing his nascent presidential campaign. Cardenas told us privately the government would use the constitution to "liquidate the opposition" and presaged the attack on his house, which he suspected would be good publicity for his campaign. End Summary.

Something MASSista This Way Comes

¶2. (U) A small pro-government group gathered March 7 at a public field in the Lake Titicaca community of Sankajahuira at about 8 a.m. By noon the crowd had grown to about 500 and walked about 200 meters down the street to the house of former Vice President Victor Hugo Cardenas. After clamoring outside the residence for a short time, the crowd broke through the residence's door and entered the courtyard. Lidia Catari, Cardenas' wife, appeared through the second floor window, extolling the crowd to leave. The crowd proceeded to enter the house and attempt to burn furniture and mattresses. The smoke forced Catari, her sister, and two sons to flee the house. The four managed to get through the crowd to safety, after enduring a gauntlet of punches, kicks, and sticks. The family was sent to a La Paz hospital, where Catari and her son Iru, who sustained injuries that may have damaged his vision in his left eye, remained as of the morning of March 9.

Cardenas Blames Evo

¶3. (U) Cardenas thanked a Unitel television crew along the

outskirts of the melee for taking his family to La Paz's Arco Iris Hospital. He also confirmed that his nephew had sustained injuries from a flogging in the small town's main plaza March 7 and thanked locals for sneaking him out of the town at night. Although Cardenas accused local peasant farmer leaders and MAS activists Cruz Alarcon and Alfredo Huanapaco for organizing the attack, he immediately identified the Morales Administration as its intellectual authors. "I place responsibility for any attack on my wife and my children on the President (Morales) and all of his government."

No Police for Opposition in the Altiplano

¶4. (U) According to Cardenas, the police did not arrive until 3 p.m., about an hour and a half after the family was forced out of the house. Cardenas said he tried to call Police Commander Gen. Miguel Gemio and local Police commanders, but that no one would take his call when he identified himself. La Paz Police Commander Edgar Revilla allegedly called Cardenas back to tell him he called too late to mobilize a police response. Vice-Minister of Government Marcos Farfan claimed 55 police had been dispatched, but retreated from the crowd and were awaiting reinforcements when the house was taken. No police are visible in any of the video footage to date of the protest. Although the police claim they are in control of the house, press reports MAS partisans continue to surround it, with police no closer than 150 meters away. The house was ransacked and protesters painted "reclaimed for the people, asshole" across its facade. Community activist Cruz Alarcon claimed the group will convert the residence into a shelter for the elderly.

Cardenas' Pleas for Police Long Ignored

¶5. (C) Cardenas' campaign manager Javier Flores told PolOff March 8 that Cardenas had tried to call Minister of the Government Alfredo Rada multiple times to request police protection of his home the day before the attack, but was continually hung up on. Cardenas decided late the same day to make a public request to Rada via television program Cadena A. Flores contends that Cardenas has been trying to get Rada to commit police to protect his home since MAS activists started threatening to seize it in the wake of the January 25 referendum endorsing the new constitution. (Note: RSO confirms through Bolivian National Police sources that Cardenas' pleas for help were explicitly ignored. End Note.)

Flores said an initial plan, hatched by MAS leaders from La Paz, to take Cardenas' residence January 31 fizzled into a small protest due to lack of local support. "They learned from that mistake," said Flores. "This time they applied a lot more pressure, brought in more people in (from La Paz), and spent more money to get local people to turn out." Flores contended Peruvians with MRTA links were also enlisted in at least the organization and execution of the attack, as many locals allegedly confided to Cardenas.

Unable to Burn Concrete, Crowd Resorts to Old Folks Home

¶6. (C) Flores claimed pro-MAS activists came up with the idea to turn the residence into a shelter for the elderly only after attempts to burn the residence failed because the building is entirely constructed from concrete. He said the original idea was to burn the house "come what may to the occupants" in order to send a signal to indigenous leaders that dissent "is not going to be allowed in the countryside (campo)." Flores told us March 3 that Cardenas was picking up rumors of a week-end attack on his residence and that Cardenas' camp had encouraged Cadena A to set up remote cameras March 6, the day before the attack. Flores claimed these cameras provided the only recorded images of the attack. Media reported the crowd had posted "community police" early March 9 to keep police and press away from the incident. An AP reporter was reportedly assaulted for entering the house the next day and the media continues to be

kept away from the scene by pro-government groups.

Planting the Seeds

¶7. (C) Government officials deny the government was involved in the planning of the attack, which they characterize as a spontaneous outburst of public will. However, the seeds of this conflict were planted by Vice Minister of Social Movements Sasha Llorenti, who explained in a letter to Vice President Garcia Linera the last week of January that Article 124 of the new constitution would be used to "judge as traitors" all Bolivians involved in the governments of Gonzalo "Goni" Sanchez de Lozada and Victor Hugo Cardenas. (Note: Cardenas served as Vice President during Goni's first term as President; this and other references to using the constitution to target "traitors" in ref tel. End Note.)

Reaping the Whirlwind

¶8. (U) Local protest organizers Alarcon and Huanapaco justified the seizure of Cardenas' property as retribution for Cardenas' "express treason" campaigning against a January 25 constitutional referendum. Huanapaco said Cardenas' political opposition to the government made all of his Bolivian property vulnerable to public seizure under "communitarian justice" and that Cardenas could "live in Miami." Lake Region Peasant Farmer Federation President Gonzalo Apaza blamed Cardenas' wife for inciting the crowd by asking them to leave her property and go home. It is unclear to what extent the protest reflected popular demands, but it was attended by many prominent local leaders, including Achacachi Mayor Eugenio Rojas, who is also a prominent leader in the sometimes violent indigenous Ponchos Rojos movement. Rojas said the seizure was not his decision, but rather "the vision of the people."

Blaming the Victim

¶9. (C) Vice Minister of Government Marcos Farfan said an investigation was already underway, but discounted the event as a spontaneous act of drunk revelers at a local fair and the injuries as "not serious, by all accounts." Farfan accused Cardenas of crying fake tears for the media "with the clear intention of making himself a victim." Farfan further blamed Cardenas for using the attack as a political issue in his presidential campaign, but, in the same March 8 interview, used politics to absolve the government of guilt, using the bizarre logic that the government cannot help how popular it is. "It is not our fault that 70 percent of the Bolivian population has voted for the MAS (Movement Toward Socialism; ruling party) ... look, in some areas of this population, that identify with the MAS, you can have conflicts and problems with certain people. That is not a problem of the government or the MAS."

GOB Endorses Assault; Evo More Indigenous Than Thou

¶10. (U) Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera squarely blamed Cardenas, who he characterized as the "executioner of the people," for the attack because he "is always doing things against his local community, against his own brothers." Garcia added that under the new constitution's stipulations for public seizure of "unproductive land," Cardenas may not have the legal right to reclaim his house or other properties in the area. Although he expressed sympathy for Cardenas' family and said he did not condone the attack, President Morales added that the Bolivian people "will not forgive traitors." He added that Cardenas had lied about Morales and the new constitution and the "these lies have consequences." Morales echoed Vice Minister of Justice Wilfredo Chavez's earlier statements that the government is "not responsible" for what happens in the countryside and that Cardenas should not blame the government for "his problems." Morales also criticized Cardenas for changing his indigenous last name

(Note: a family decision made when Cardenas was a child. End Note.) and criticized Cardenas for having multiple discourses tailored for "white" Bolivians, NGOs, and indigenous audience. Without getting into specifics, Morales compared this perceived disingenuousness with his own discourse, which is "the same for everyone."

Was Fear of a Cardenas Candidacy the Real Target?

¶11. (C) Flores said that the government's use of constitutional and popular pretexts to excuse the attack are "a smokescreen." Flores contends the real motivation is to remove a rising challenger to President Morales for the December national elections. Flores said Cardenas' national tours for the "no" campaign in the run-up to the January constitutional referendum gave him exposure and a bounce in the polls. He claimed the government only started targeting him once he started emerging as a credible prospect to be "an indigenous alternative to Evo." Cardenas publicly claimed his house was targeted to intimidate him from running, but that "they won't silence my voice."

¶12. (C) Presaging the March 7 attack on his home, Cardenas told Charge' February 20 (septel) that the government would use the constitution as a "tool" or as a "weapon" with their goal being to "liquidate their adversaries, including the prefects (opposition governors)." Regarding ongoing threats to evict his family from Sankajahuira, Cardenas said this was MAS propaganda, and that his family had not been threatened by the community itself. "I'll dance with them on Saturday," he said, referring to an invitation to a dance in his community that weekend. But, he continued, if the house were occupied, that would make for great news, the "kind of news you cannot get unless you're tortured." Since the attack, Cardenas has told us he will canvass human rights organizations with the story, urging them to publicly support his complaints to protect both himself and others from political prosecution.

Comment:

¶13. (C) The government's oft-used tactic of evading blame for attacks on the opposition targets because it cannot control spontaneous outbursts of "the will of the people" falls particularly flat in this incident, as Cardenas had the good sense to get on television to document his pleas for police support the day before the conflict. Although we do not know if the government had a direct role in organizing the attack, at a minimum it contributed to it through deliberate negligence. Cardenas' opportunistic comments about reaping the publicity of such an attack, which he was aware was planned for the weekend, and planting cameras the day before are troubling, but should not lessen our outrage. No one should be expected to abandon their home for their political views. We are concerned that indigenous communities are already invoking the recently constitutionally-enshrined concept of "communitarian justice" to legitimize mob actions, beyond the original scope of its traditional intent. The government does not seem to have a problem with this interpretation, so long as it serves its political ends. End Comment

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